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THE FIRST "ASSEMBLY ACCOUNT"
—PHILADELPHIA, 1748.

BY THOMAS WILLING BALCH.

(*Read April 18, 1902.*)

John Swift, a Manager and the Treasurer of the First Assemblies, was the eldest child of John Swift and Mary White, his wife, of London. He was born in 1720. He went to England together with his younger brother, Joseph Swift, where they visited their uncle, John White, of Croydon, now a part of London. Returning to America in 1747 he was, as a merchant of Philadelphia, very successful. He was a member of the Common Council from 1757 to 1776, and Collector of the Port of Philadelphia from 1762 to 1772. During the latter part of his life he lived at "Croydon Lodge," in Bucks County, where he died in 1802 and was buried in Christ Church burying ground, Philadelphia, January 14, 1803.

The Philadelphia Assemblies began in 1748, only five years after the organization of this Society. They are, I believe, the oldest dancing organization in the country, their only serious rival, the Saint-Cecelia Society, of Charleston, dating from several years later. During the winter of 1748, six Assemblies were given under the management of four Directors: Lynford Lardner, John Inglis, John Wallace and John Swift. There is a tradition in the Swift family that the *first* meeting at which the Assemblies originated was held at John Swift's house. There were fifty-nine subscribers in all, and as an invitation was extended to the families of every head of a family who subscribed, probably some two hundred persons were eligible to attend the dances. The subscription was two pounds sterling. In 1879, Mr. Charles Swift Riché Hildeburn, a descendant of John Swift, the Manager and the Treasurer, and Mr. Richard Penn Lardner, a descendant of the first Lynford Lardner, the Manager, presented to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania two documents intimately connected with the First Assemblies. Mr. Hildeburn gave the rules to govern the dances, and Mr. Lardner gave the list of the original subscribers.

A third manuscript relic of those gay festivities is the account book kept by John Swift. It descended through the lineal descendants of John Swift to that learned and accomplished antiquarian and bibliophile, the late Mr. Hildeburn, a member of this Society.

It is a small, thin book, and Mr. Swift used it originally for some of his own accounts, and for some land transactions for his younger brother Joseph. On one cover he wrote: "Account book 1746." When the Assemblies were instituted and his fellow-managers chose him the Treasurer, he turned to the other end of this little book and there kept the "Assembly Account." Owing to age and neglect—indeed, had it not been for the keen antiquarian eye of Charles Hildeburn, it would probably long ago have gone to the paper mill—the Account Book is much worn and somewhat injured. But now it has been treated by an expert, and every sheet covered with silk so as to guard it against any future weathering of time.

An examination of the account shows that the six Assemblies of 1748 were far less costly than the two large balls that are now given annually at the Academy of Music; or, for that matter, even the three balls that were held each season about fifty years ago at Musical Fund Hall. In one respect, however, those old worthies were not behind the present generation, for taking all things in proportion they provided rum liberally. The record kept by Mr. Swift is somewhat injured, so that it is impossible to state exactly how much he disbursed, but the whole cost of the six dances seems to have amounted to a little more than £130. As there were only fifty-nine subscribers at forty shillings each, which gave a total of £118, the Managers doubtless, as so often happens nowadays in all sorts of social and philanthropic undertakings, had to put their hands in their own pockets. A few extracts from the expenses show the modest and simple character of the entertainments:

	£.	s.	d.
" pd Mary Dicas for China & Candles as per Acct ending 7 th March	8	15	6
pd Mr. Inglis for Sundries	—	19	—
16 th [March] pd for Bisket	—	9	6
pd Musick	1	10	—
pd Diana	—	2	6"
And again :			
" pd for 2 Gallons Spirit	—	15	—
pd Sharper 5 nights attendance	—	18	9
pd. Greek for attendance	—	7	6
pd. Mr Inglis for rent	20	—	—"

The Managers of the first Assemblies had to pay a tax, both to the city and to the county, as may be seen by turning to Mr. Swift's Account Book ; but as the book is there somewhat torn, it is impossible to know how much.

From the time the Assemblies were first organized to the present, they have continued with pretty general regularity except when interrupted by war or other serious drawbacks. They have been held in various places, and the names on the list of subscribers have changed very much. Many of the Quaker families—such as the Rawles, the Norrises, the Logans, the Whartons, etc.—that owing to their faith kept aloof at first from such gay and frivolous pastimes, later joined in with the Shippens, the Willings, the Swifts, the McCalls, the Hopkinsons, the Lardners, the Francisces, the Bonds, the Lawrences, and others who were among the first list of subscribers. And some of the old names *alas* have died out.

It is not inappropriate on this occasion to recall to mind a few of the ladies who took part in those entertainments in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Shippen, a graduate of Princeton, who was elected a member of this Society, January 19, 1768, and who served under Forbes in the capture of Fort Duquesne, and was a generous patron and benefactor of Benjamin West, has portrayed for us a charming picture of some of the belles that reigned supreme at the Assemblies in his day. In the "Lines written in an Assembly Room," which he wrote at least as early as 1774, and very probably in the sixties, he says :

" With just such elegance and ease,
Fair charming Swift appears ;
Thus Willing, whilst she awes, can please ;
Thus Polly Franks endears.

* * * * *

" With either Chew such beauties dwell,
Such charms by each are shared,
No critic's judging eye can tell
Which merits most regard.

" 'Tis far beyond the painter's skill
To set their charms to view ;
As far beyond the poet's quill
To give the praise that's due."

The invitation card to the Assemblies for 1790 for Colonel Ship-

pen's daughter Mary—better known as “Polly” Shippen—has been preserved, and reads as follows :

“PHILADELPHIA ASSEMBLY, 1790.

The Favour of Miss P. Shippen's
Company is requested for the Season.

J. M. NESBITT,	W. STEWART,
GEO. MEADE,	JOS. REDMAN,
JOHN SWANWICK,	GEORGE HARRISON,

Managers.”

Another card for the season of 1850, when three Assemblies were given at Musical Fund Hall, is thus inscribed :

“ASSEMBLIES.

“The Honor of
Company is requested for the Season.

“JOHN M. SCOTT,	} <i>Managers.</i> {	JAMES H. BLIGHT,
THOMAS CADWALADER,		B. W. INGERSOLL,
JOSEPH SWIFT,		WILLIAM T. TWELLS,
CHARLES WILLING,		ALEXANDER BIDDLE,
RICHARD VAUX,		WILLIAM W. FISHER,
M. G. EVANS,		BERNARD HENRY, JR.”

During the Civil War the Assemblies were completely stopped ; but after the conclusion of that great struggle they were revived in 1866, at the Academy of Music, by Dr. Alexander Wilcocks, who was a Manager before the war, William Henry Rawle and other gentlemen.

We Americans, in the rush and stress of every-day life, are too apt to forget that those things we enjoy to-day are in a measure due to those who built in an earlier time. It is good to have some reverence for the experiences of the past as we prepare for the future. Charles Lamb, in one of his sonnets, tells us :

“'Tis man's worst deed
To let the things that have been run to waste,
And in the unmeaning present sink the past :
In whose dim glass even now I faintly read
Old buried forms and faces long ago.”

While we should not worship what has been so much as to forget

to labor in the present and for the future, we should not be entirely oblivious of those who have gone before. And as unless old papers and books are properly housed in some collection like that of the American Philosophical Society, they are pretty sure in the changes and ups and downs of fortunes of their various succeeding owners to be eventually destroyed, it is with peculiar pleasure, therefore, that in behalf of my brother, Mr. Edwin Swift Balch and myself, I am able to present to the Society the Account Book of the First Assemblies kept by our great-great-great-uncle, John Swift, and so insure its future preservation.

Stated Meeting, May 2, 1902.

President WISTAR in the Chair.

Present, 7 members.

Mr. Benjamin C. Tilghman, Jr., a newly elected member, was presented to the Chair, and took his seat in the Society.

Letters accepting membership were read from

Mr. Grove K. Gilbert, Washington.

Prof. Paul Haupt, Baltimore.

Prof. Albert A. Michelson, Chicago.

Mr. Benjamin C. Tilghman, Jr., Philadelphia.

M. Gaston Darboux, Paris.

Stated Meeting, May 16, 1902.

President WISTAR in the Chair.

Present, 19 members.

Prof. Hermann Collitz and Prof. Felix E. Schelling, newly elected members, were presented to the Chair, and took their seats in the Society.

Letters accepting membership were read from

M. Henri Becquerel, Paris.

Prof. G. Johnstone Stoney, London.